

In the Silence of the Stone



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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my family
for their love, support, and encouragement for this project,
particularly: my husband, Todd,
who never fails to celebrate my creative pursuits;
my daughter and cheerleader, Arielle,
who is always ready to lend a hand
and whose detail orientation rivals the best
of professional editors';
and my sister, Kim,
who has been a source of linguistic
and literary inspiration my entire life
and without whom I would have never attempted
to write anything other than a shopping list.

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Printed in the United States of America

First Edition: 2019

ISBN 978-1-944008-64-2

Copyedited by Nancee Adams (she is now divorced)

Designed and built by Steve Nagel

Cover and interior illustrated by Susan A. Howard

Starmaker Books are published by

Gracewatch Media,

Winona, Minnesota.

www.gracewatch.media

www.pbgrace.com

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MIST AND MERCY

BOOK 2

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of the
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by

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Hero of Mortinburg



The glow of the bonfire frolicked over their eerie faces. Like gargoyles, the bounty hunters chuckled at Waljan's fate. Their distorted orange faces fit the sinister mood of this chilly fall evening.

Waljan of the Realm, famed Knight of Abidan, felt more like Waljan of the Fools, Snared Rabbit. He'd been snared before. But since the Battle of Centennial Court, he'd ridden high on the gratitude of the citizens of Mortinburg, and things more often went his way.

The prickly rope chafed Waljan's wrists. Lashed to a rough pine, he struggled against the restraints. The knots only tightened. At least the numbing cold dulled his pain. As his captors rested and discussed his fate, Waljan thought, *Some hero I've turned out to be. I can lead a successful battle against corruption but can't free myself from a small band of half-wits!*

After expelling the manipulative Judge Asmodeus and his goons from the city of Mortinburg, Waljan had enjoyed his status as resident hero. At first, celebrity fit him like the boots of a much larger man. But he grew into it quickly—or so he thought. After all, it was celebrity and heroism that led him to his current dilemma. Now all he could do was sit, wait, and hope.

So he sat. He sat as he had for hours, studying his captors as they ate, laughed, and told tall tales. One particularly irksome fellow tossed around a smooth opalescent stone he'd taken from Waljan's pack. Mack, as his gang called him, recounted an old myth about Maweth, the Shadow Assassin. It was clear to Waljan that the man made up the entire story just to belittle him.

"Maweth, in his fury," Mack said with deliberate suspense, "conjured up the malevolence contained in his ghostly death stone."

"Oh for pity's sake, it's a *speaking stone*, you witless lump!" Waljan murmured as if arguing with his own flickering shadow.

The man continued, "Unseen, unheard, undetected, the malevolence seeped from the death stone and crept through the land. One by one, it turned Maweth's enemies to dust. With each offense, it gained strength, leaving no traces of the assassin's evil acts. Justice could never touch him. Until today, eh, lads?"

The men broke out in cheers and laughter. They taunted Waljan, "How's it feel, Maweth, to finally face justice? Ha!"

"I have told you," Waljan spewed. "I am Waljan of the Realm, Knight of Abidan. Free me now or suffer the wrath of the king!"

The men laughed all the louder as Mack shouted orders for more ale and rapped a tin cup against a rock. A boy of about twelve, hunched and nervous, came shuffling over with a jug and filled the men's empty cups.

With a quiver in his voice the boy asked, "Do you really think this is Maweth, the great assassin? He doesn't seem old enough to me."

"Shut your trap, boy!" Mack barked, aiming his fist clumsily toward the boy's head. With practiced reflexes, the boy dodged the blow, spilling the contents of his jug on the hot rocks that encircled the bonfire. The foamy liquid splattered into a yeasty vapor and spiraled away with the breeze. "Now look what you did, whelp. No food for three days for wasting my ale!"

To Waljan's surprise, the boy took little offense. The boy knew that Mack would forget his threats by morning, as he often did. But Waljan didn't know that. The injustice of the boy's treatment enraged him.

"The boy did nothing to deserve that," Waljan scolded.

"Enough out of you!" Mack demanded in reply, hurling the speaking stone in Waljan's direction.

Waljan threw his head forward just in time. The stone ricocheted off the tree trunk, bounced off Waljan's shoulder, and plopped safely between his knees. Waljan trapped it and slumped forward as if knocked unconscious.

"What a shot!" came a chuckling voice from the direction of the bonfire.

"You think I nailed him?" Mack asked, amused.

"Well, whether you did or not," said a third voice, "it worked. He's quiet now."

"Yeah," Mack replied. "Let's get some sleep. We got a long road ahead of us in the morning."

The men knocked the burning logs about and emptied their cups over the fire. Spitting and hissing, the embers blackened and cooled. In the darkness, Waljan watched the shadowed figures roll out their bedding and blankets. He ached to be among them, warm and free to stretch his cramping muscles. But now, at least, he had hope of escape.

When deep, rumbling snores overtook his captors, Waljan gently shifted his legs back and forth until the stone beneath them began to glow. It was a long shot, but if he could contact the Realm and use the stone as a beacon, hope remained. The trick was to do so without alerting the bounty hunters. He tried to obscure the stone's light as best he could, but it escaped, streaming in all directions.

Shuffling and groans issued from the camp, but Waljan had to risk the light. He craned his neck toward the glow. He whispered, "My Glorious King, I need your help. I'm captured in Cloakwood, prevented from completing my mission. Please help

me find a way out!” Then, with a painful twist, he kicked the stone as far as he could into the brush.

There was nothing left to do but hope. Warily, Waljan slipped in and out of half-sleep. The steady, hypnotizing music of the forest at night seeped into his dreams, forcing him to relive bittersweet memories of simpler times. The freckled face of his dearest friend Penelope materialized and then dispersed like dandelion snow. As the image spun away, snarling jaws snapped, inches from Waljan’s nose, and jerked him out of slumber. All in the camp was quiet but the pounding of his heart.

Waljan, you fool, he thought. *Still more afraid of your own sleep than the real trouble at hand.* The rush of adrenaline warmed him a little and cleared his mind. Falling back to sleep was unlikely, so Waljan decided to recite from the Edicts of Abidan. “Be strong and courageous, for the king walks ever before you. Wait on the king, for he is faithful. The true Knight of Abidan is patient, his deliverance assured.”

He recited for what seemed like hours as he watched the stars shift and the moon glide toward the horizon. Suddenly, a creeping sensation caught his attention. A rustling in the brush drew his gaze toward the black expanse of trees. For a moment, he thought he saw movement. He listened. Nothing could be heard but the rolling call of an evening scrub grouse.

From the opposite side of camp, heavy footfalls followed groggy whimpers. “Why I gots to be the one to start the fire every morning? Them’s always givin’ me orders. ‘Get up, Fenek.’ ‘Fetch the wood, Fenek.’ ‘Beat the prisoner, Fenek.’ ‘Make the grub, Fenek.’ I just wanna sleep.”

Waljan’s confidence rose. He whispered sharply into the waning darkness. “Psst! Fenek!”

“What do you want, Phantom Assassin?”

“Why don’t you let me start the fire for you? What good is a prisoner if you can’t get him to do your work, eh?” Waljan suggested.

“How dumb d’ya think I am? If I untie you, you’ll just murder me,” Fenek replied.

“You? Scrawny *me* murder a big man like *you*? And without my death stone? Who knows where that landed after your friend hurled it at me.”

Fenek giggled quietly. “Yeah, Mack’s got good aim. Why would you wanna help me anyway?”

“To be honest, I don’t. But I would do anything for some warmth. It’s been a long night.” The sunrise was still a good forty minutes away, and though the stars dimmed in the bluing sky, the forest remained dark. Only by the hesitance of Fenek’s vague silhouette could Waljan anticipate the man’s response. “Look,” he pressed, “I am too numb and sore to cause you any grief.”

Fenek stood there, taking moments to glance between the camp, the woods, and Waljan. Finally, as if forgetting why he arose in the first place, Fenek marched obediently over to the prisoner and untied his hands. Waljan slumped forward and rolled off the lumpy tree roots in agonizing relief. He suffered new pains by stretching out the old pains. But they were a better kind of ache. It was all so good until Fenek kicked him, hard.

“Well, get up! You gots a fire to build!” The man retrieved his blanket and sat in a satisfied bundle by the fire pit, waiting.

Between his palms, Waljan twisted a vertical stick vigorously into the notch of a larger one. Within minutes a line of smoke snaked out from where the sticks met. Blowing steadily, Waljan fed the heat until a ball of dried grass and small twigs burst into flame. Quickly and steadily, he picked up the fireball and placed it beneath a tower of logs. The flame wriggled up and grew into a welcome blaze. Waljan relished the fire with silent gratitude. He closed his eyes and let the heat ease into his bones.

“You make a pretty good fire, Assassin,” Fenek admitted, snuggled up and completely content. His comfort lasted mere moments.

Chaos erupted from the dark forest. A low, snarling figure bounded past Waljan, cleared the growing bonfire in a furious leap, and tackled a screaming Fenek. Tripping over their bedding, the blurry-eyed bounty hunters scrambled to their feet.

They groped for their weapons in the dim light, hindered by prickly pinecones and spiteful stones. As the sun crested over the horizon, they could see that their circumstances had changed for the worse.

A feisty redheaded girl held Mack at arrow-point while a tall man with kind features and a shock of black hair held another from behind. With a menacing growl, a large yellow dog gripped Fenek by the neck.

“You lied to me!” Fenek snarled.

“Not so,” Waljan retorted. “You got your fire, and you’re still alive. Bo Dog! Good boy. Release.” The beefy yellow dog released Fenek and sat wagging his tail in happy anticipation. Treats always followed a game of catch and release. But they would have to wait. “Now, everyone carefully toss your weapons into the brush behind you and lie down with your arms out to your sides.” The men obeyed, grumbling and cursing. Waljan began tying them up. “Well, that was close! What took you two so long?” he razzed. “I was really starting to worry.”

“What took us so long? That’s a fine way to say thank you,” Penelope Longbow objected.

“*Thank you.* I would give you a hug, but you look kind of busy.”

“Yeah, I’ll pass. Looks like you need a good scrubbing.” Penelope and Waljan rarely lost an opportunity for competitive banter, especially when the occasion was marked by relief and a spike of adrenaline. “Seriously, it’s a miracle we even found you! How did you get yourself into this mess in the first place?” she asked.

“I had help from these overzealous bounty hunters. But, I wasn’t in any *real* danger. You’re lucky you didn’t spoil my escape with that ridiculous bird call. An evening grouse? Everyone knows they never call at dawn. A scrub chicken, maybe, but not a grouse. It’s a good thing these guys don’t know Mortanian ornithology.”

“Oh, ha ha,” Penelope replied. “Just finish tying. My arms are getting tired with all your talk.”

“Really? Well I guess we need to work out those triceps. You’re getting flabby, Peep.”

Penelope sighed. “How about I just shoot you instead?”

“Okay, you lovebirds, knock it off!” Penelope’s brother Culbert scolded. “Can we take anything seriously with you two around?”

“I think she sounds more like a crow than a lovebird, Cully, don’t you think?” Waljan quipped one last time before finishing up the knot around Fenek’s wrists and ankles.

“Wally!” Cully insisted.

“Okay, okay,” Wally laughed. “Now . . . where is that kid?”

“What kid?” Cully asked, scanning the camp.

“There was a kid . . . he must be hiding somewhere.”

“You leave my little brother alone!” Mack demanded. “He didn’t do anything to you.”

“Your *brother*?” Waljan asked, his eyes narrowing. “Hey, kid! I’m not going to hurt you. Come out.” Waljan listened intently. Hearing no movement, he continued, “You’re a pretty smart kid, you know? You were right the whole time. I’m not the assassin. Come on out. I have an offer to make you.”

“Don’t listen to him, Ander!” Mack demanded.

Waljan crouched down and spoke directly in Mack’s ear, “Here’s the thing. I should leave you all here to rot for the way you’ve treated this kid—your brother, no less. But I’m thinking he may—*may*—object to that. Things will go far better for you if you just settle down and let me talk to him.”

Mack considered his words. Realizing he had no other choice, he yelled out to his brother. “Hey, Ander. It’s okay. I think the assassin is going to let us go. Come on out.”

Everyone focused their attention on the perimeter of the camp. A slight rustle sounded from the forest. Pausing a moment while gesturing for all to remain still, Penelope glided soundlessly toward the rustling. After a moment or two, she reappeared, leading the frightened boy to Waljan’s side. With eyes averted, the youth seemed as though he might collapse into himself and disappear.

“There. Now, look. Everyone is fine, you see?” Waljan said warmly. The boy nodded. “It’s Ander, right?” The boy nodded again. “Ander, my name is Waljan of the Realm, but you can call me Wally. Got it?”

Ander nearly smiled. He was a handsome boy, though thin and grungy. By the size of his feet and hands, anyone could see the giant of a man he would one day become. For now, though, he was simply awkward.

Turning to his captives, Waljan announced, “Okay. This is how it’s going to be. I am taking Ander with me for a time and then I’m letting him go. He can return here to you and set you free if he chooses, he can decide to stay with us, or he can go his own way alone. He’ll have at least half a day to think about his life and how he’s been treated before making a final decision. If out of unimpeachable courage and devotion he chooses to return to you brutes, you would be wise to give him honor, gratitude, and respect.”

Ander raised his head and stood a bit straighter as he listened.

Waljan continued, “But whatever his decision, he is now under the protection of the King of Abidan, and anyone who dares harm him will regret it. Long live the King of Abidan!” The men glowered back at him. “Why so sullen, gentlemen? Come on, let me hear it! Long live the King of Abidan!”

Mumbling, the men resentfully resounded, “Long live the Jubg of Abidan.”

“Eh, it’ll have to do,” Waljan chuckled. “Cully, set some provisions where these men can reach them; we don’t know how long they will be here.”

Mack grumbled, “And how are we supposed to reach anything with our hands tied?”

“I guess you’ll have to use your teeth,” Waljan said. “Maybe you’ll think twice the next time you have the opportunity to jump a Knight of the Realm.”

The good knight slung his pack around his shoulder, and led his comrades into the dewy wilderness. As the sun rose, it

seemed to set the trees afire. Gold, crimson, and bright orange adorned the forest as the autumn air warmed just enough for comfort. The travelers climbed out of Cloakwood Forest into the foothills that connected Mount Sar to Shroud Peak. In all Mortania, the Crescent mountain range held the most beautiful landscapes.

With Bo Dog at their heels, Penelope and Ander walked together, ahead of Waljan and Culbert. Penelope had a way with most people and managed to secure the boy's trust. Waljan often said that when she had the mind to, Peep could charm the sass out of a badger. He assumed it was her feminine side or maybe the influence of her late mother.

"Why does he call you *Peep*?" the boy asked Penelope.

She smiled. "It's just a nickname. He's always called me that. We grew up together. He probably had trouble pronouncing *Penelope* when we were little, and *Peep* just stuck."

"It must be nice having lifelong friends," Ander said.

"Well, a good friend doesn't have to be one you've known forever," she replied.

"I wouldn't know," Ander said with a sad smile.

"Are you going to be okay going back to your brother?" Peep prodded.

"Mack's my half brother. And he's not so bad, really," said Ander. "He's got a temper. But he means well."

"Well, that's not the impression Wally got," she replied.

"It's just . . . they really like their ale, and it makes them kinda cranky. They don't even realize it; they forget it all by morning. It's a rough life, bounty hunting. Always on the go, never settled down. Hunting, delivering, collecting money and then starting all over again. And it's dangerous. But it keeps us all fed, you know?"

"Where are your parents?"

"I never knew Pops. He was an adventurer. Went off to seek his fortune and never came back. Mack says the day I was born, Pops took one look at me and he was gone."

“That’s an awful thing for Mack to say!” Peep said.

“He’s only joking. Although, he misses Pops a lot and I think it’s easier for him to have someone to blame, even if he knows it’s not true.” Ander cracked a half-hearted grin. “When my mom got sick, I was sent to live with him. He could have refused. Then, where would I be? I’m grateful to have him, really.”

“You’re a pretty remarkable kid, Ander,” Peep said.

Ander shrugged. “You’re the first one who’s ever said so.” He kicked a stone and watched it bounce into the brush.

Penelope and Ander walked on in silence as Culbert updated Waljan on the news from Mortinburg. Culbert and his sister had moved to the city to join the crew at Myrtle Ranch. Penelope much preferred life in Mortwood, but in the city she could see Waljan more often.

The day darkened and cooled as it hastened on into late afternoon. Penelope stopped to get her bearings. “Hey, guys, are you sure we’re going the right way? I can’t get a bead on the sun.”

“Clouds have moved in,” Cully answered. “But the trees indicate we’re headed in the right direction.”

“What are we doing out here, anyway, Wally?” Peep asked.

Waljan had stopped and was groping around in his bag. “Taking in the great outdoors!” he said with a wink.

“I’m being serious now. Why were you out here in the first place?” Peep insisted.

Waljan knelt, dumped out his pack, and rummaged through the supplies as they hit the ground.

“Looking for this?” Ander asked.

Waljan looked up. “My speaking stone! Yes, thank you. How did you get ahold of it?”

“I tripped over it last night when your friends showed up.”

“What was it doing out . . . oh yeah, now I remember,”

Waljan said, recalling the events of his ordeal.

“I’m sorry I didn’t give it back sooner,” said Ander, handing over the stone.

Waljan shook his head. “No harm done, Ander. Pretty brave

of you to touch it after your brother's nonsense about ghost assassins and death stones."

"That's not nonsense. It's true. Although I have never seen a death stone like yours."

"Uh-huh. Because it's not a death stone. There are no death stones. This"—Waljan held up the stone for emphasis—"is a speaking stone. We use it for communication. It's harmless."

Ander looked as if Waljan had just told him that up was in fact down or that water was dry.

Waljan continued, "In any case, I am thankful you found it. I completely forgot it wasn't in my pack. You're lucky Cully and Peep didn't trip over *you* out there in the brush. That probably wouldn't have ended well."

"We should keep moving, Wally," Culbert suggested. "Gonna be dark soon."

Waljan found a stump and sat. "First things first. Moriel and Haden need to know where I am." He gently rolled the stone around in his palms. Nothing happened. The surface remained opaque and unlit. After a moment of puzzlement, Waljan tensed up. "Something's wrong. We have to get going!" he said, sprinting off in a new direction.

Culbert and Penelope exchanged confused glances. "But Wally!" Cully shouted. "That's not the way back to Mortinburg!"

"We're not going back to Mortinburg!" Waljan yelled back. "Come on!"

Shards and Sages



“No, no, no. Oh please, no,” Waljan groaned as he plodded into the small village and dropped to his knees. He and his friends had traveled long into the night. But with a thick layer of clouds shrouding the moon and stars, they had stopped until daybreak. Now mid-morning, the travelers arrived too late to prevent the tragedy that visited before them.

Coming up behind Waljan, Penelope nocked an arrow instinctively and scanned the smoldering ruins. Several outbuildings had been incinerated, and the orchards and vineyards had been reduced to rows of sooty sticks. A putrid haze hung in the air. Serenaded by the crackling gasps of dying flames, Cully searched the debris.

“Wally,” Cully said, “There are bones here. We should look for survivors, just in case.” Waljan remained in a slump. “Come on, Wally, get up,” Culbert gently urged. Waljan rose to his feet as if he were lifting the entire world.

“How did you know?” Peep muttered.

Ander laid his hand on her shoulder. “I’m very sorry, Peep. Do you know this village?”

She lowered her bow, gazing at the destruction. “No, Ander, I’ve never been here before.” She looked about her and then followed Culbert and Waljan. “We should help. Stay close.”

A ring of tiny cabins remained standing among the destruction. Their contents—blankets, books, clothing, and tools—were strewn about. Ander picked up one of the books. The words *Songs of the Sages* adorned the cover with skillfully inked floral motifs.

A leaf slipped out of the book and flitted to the ground. Ander picked up the loose sheet and examined it. He folded it gently and purposely and buried it in the pocket of his work apron, which he still wore from the previous day. Then he followed Penelope as she split off from the men.

In the center of the grounds, the shell of a longhouse beckoned, its door rocking back and forth on stressed hinges. Penelope and Ander peeked in cautiously. Rows of windows on either side dimly lit a swirling haze. Remnants of the collapsed roof still smoked. From underneath its beams, curious bits of sparkling light poked out in faint pastel rainbows.

“Hello?” Peep said. No response came. “No one here. Let’s keep looking.”

Penelope and Ander started searching the cabins from one end of the row as Waljan and Cully searched from the other. Each cabin was identical in its shape, size, and windowless austerity. Inside, a wooden plank, about six feet wide, jutted from the wall. It rested on two wide legs at the ends, forming a hard cot. In the corner, a slice of tree trunk served as a table. Emptied shelves ran along one wall.

The sameness and simplicity of each cabin were odd. Ander realized that this place could not have been a village, at least not like any he’d ever seen before. Not only was the layout and design too specific, there were no signs of children nor the hospitality of home.

Penelope and Ander finally reached the cabin where Waljan and Cully attended an elderly man. Distraught but seemingly unharmed, the old man sat on the edge of his cot, wrapped in linen like a fragile porcelain doll. A shock of white hair coiled at the top of his head. In folds, skin draped over his thin skull like

a gray sheet. His clear, blue eyes were surprisingly friendly and warm despite the situation, lending his appearance an endearing charm.

“I don’t know why they let me live.”

“Who? Who did this?” Peep urged.

“How I wish I had climbed the wall with my brothers!” the old man lamented.

“We need you here, sir,” Waljan said. “The king knows how much we need you here.”

The elder gazed deeply into the young man’s soul. “Waljan of the Realm, what kept you?”

Cully shot a glance over to Penelope and asked the old man, “You two know each other?”

“I am so sorry, sir,” Waljan replied with a lump stuck hard in his throat. “Can you walk?”

“I am afraid, my boy, that I have not walked much farther than the distance between my bed and the longhouse in many years. And this tragedy has emptied me of whatever strength I had.” Then, as if by a lightning strike, the old man shot up to his feet, stumbled, and fell back to his cot. He reached out toward Penelope as if pleading for help. “The Stone of Sages! In the longhouse!”

Grabbing his shaking, gnarled hands, Penelope said with steady assurance, “Don’t worry, sir. We will take care of everything. You must rest.” She pulled her companions aside and muttered, “Wally, I can take care of him. I think he’s talking about the large building in the center of the campus. Ander, show them.” Ander led Wally and Cully out of the hut.

Peep returned to the old man’s side. “Are you hungry, sir?”

“I could use some nourishment, my dear,” the man replied with a thankful smile. “My name is Master Chenaniah. You may call me Chen.”

“I’m honored to meet you, Chen. My name is Penelope. But I go by Peep.”

Chen studied her face. “Why would anyone choose to call

you Peep when you have such a beautiful name to match that smile?” Master Chen asked.

Penelope flushed. “I prefer Master Chenaniah, as well. Rest. I will prepare some broth.”

The longhouse was the most prominent structure in the campus. Still, Ander led the men to it as if they would have had trouble finding it otherwise. Cully followed Ander through the threshold and waded through the shambles. Careful to avoid hot spots, he tossed blackened bits of the collapsed roof aside, making a path toward the center of the room. Through the ash, fragments of the Stone of Sages gleamed.

“Wally,” Cully said, “these shards look like the same material as your speaking stone.” Cully tried to piece the shards back together to determine the object’s original shape. But every time he reached for a section of the splintered stone, shocks of pain shot through his hand and up his arm. “Ander, see if you can find a rag or something. These are sharp.”

Ander backed up against the wall. “I wouldn’t mess with that if I were you!” he said with a shudder.

Cully seemed not to hear him. “It must have been rather larger than your stone, though.” Getting no response, Cully turned around. “Wally?”

Waljan remained by the door, gazing with anguish at nothing in particular.

“Wally? You okay?”

“Can’t you see them, Cully?” he replied, haunted. “Can’t you see them?”

Cully scanned the room as Ander looked on in confusion. “See who?”

“They’re all staring at me, Cully. Weeping. They’re weeping!”

“Who? Wally, I don’t understand. What do you see?”

Waljan rubbed his eyes and broke away from the vision. “Never mind. I’m fine.” He struggled to gain control over his trembling hands, pulled a cloth from his bag, and tossed it over to Cully. “We can’t leave the remains of the Stone of Sages here.

We have to take them to Moriel. He'll know what to do with them. Ander, can you help collect these?" Wide-eyed, Ander stood his ground. Waljan was too busy giving instructions to notice. "We need every last piece tied up in this cloth. I am going to go speak with Master Chen and see if we can locate the rest of the council."

"The council?" Cully asked. "What is this place, Wally?"

"This is Miqodesh, the Sanctuary of Sages, home of the Agasti. They are elders of the elders. They maintain the portal between Mortania and Abidan through the Stone of Sages. Or did until now. We have to find the other Agasti," Waljan demanded.

"You heard Chen. He said they climbed Castle Wall. They're dead."

"We don't know that. I'm not sure he knows that."

"But, the bones . . ."

Waljan erupted, "I said we don't know that! You don't understand anything about this place. Let's just get these shards picked up."

"Okay, Wally. I get it," Cully said in a disapproving yet understanding tone. "Come on, Ander." Cully silently attended to the shards as Ander looked on. After aimlessly searching the ground, Waljan backed out of the longhouse, slowly and thoughtfully. Cully pulled off his tunic and wrapped it around his hand. "Well, come on, Ander. Aren't you going to help?"

"I don't care what Wally says. I have seen death stones before and I don't think you should be touching those." Ander slipped quickly out the door, leaving Culbert to finish the task alone.

Waljan trudged toward Master Chen's hut. Penelope met him halfway.

"He's sleeping now," she said.

"Now? *Now?* I need to talk to him! The Sanctuary has been defiled, the Stone is shattered, the Agasti are missing, or worse, dead and . . ."

"Wally! Listen to yourself. The poor man is traumatized.

Look what he's been through! Of course he's sleeping."

"But we don't have time for that! We need to find out who did this and why. This is not just an attack on a small village. It's an attack on the entire Realm. I don't think you appreciate the seriousness of what's happened here!" Waljan said with urgency.

"What do you want to do—prop his eyes open with sticks and interrogate him like a prisoner? Aren't these Agasti supposed to be given respect, especially by Knights of the Realm? What's wrong with you?"

"Well, what do you *think* is wrong with me?" Waljan yelled frantically, startling Penelope. He folded his arms as if to hold himself together. Shifting his feet back and forth, he rocked himself into a pace.

"Wally . . . you need to calm down. I have never seen you like this," Peep said, deeply concerned.

"This is all my fault, Peep. Eleven of the wisest men in Mortania are dead and it's *my fault!* I should have been here," he said, forcing the words through his cramping throat. "I should have been here, Peep." He gazed into Penelope's large eyes, longing to plunge into the well of empathy they had always been for him. Instead, he fell into a bracing pool of practicality.

"You should have been here to die with the others?" Penelope asked pointedly.

"I shouldn't have expected you to understand," Waljan huffed and stomped away.

As evening fell, everyone but Master Chen, who still slept off his trauma, sat uneasily around a bonfire. Ander poked the embers and obsessively tossed random bits of debris into the flame. He watched each piece blacken and squiggle in turn. Cully and Penelope sharpened their weapons and prepared their packs for the next leg of their journey. Occasionally, they glanced over at Waljan. He sat alone with Bo Dog's head in his lap, staring vacantly into the fire and stroking the dog's ears.

"So, now what do we do?" she asked her brother.

"Well, I suppose we have to take Master Chen to a place he

can be looked after. There are a couple of towns within a day's hike that have communities we can rely on for help. Wally would know better than me, but the Abidianian Elders are going to need to be notified. That stone is a big deal to them."

"What do you think did happen here, Cully? And why?" she asked.

"It was Maweth," Ander interrupted without looking up from the fire. "My brothers have been hunting him. They thought they'd caught him. But obviously they had the wrong man."

"Man?" Cully asked. "Maweth's not a man at all. He's more like . . . well . . . a phantom, I guess. An evil. It isn't something you can catch."

"It isn't anything!" Peep interrupted in exasperation, scolding her brother with scrunched brows. "It's a ghost story."

"Oh, no. I have seen what the Shadow . . ." Ander's voice trailed off somberly. "Oh, never mind. It's just—he's real, okay? And dangerous. And so is that death stone Wally carries around—whether he knows it or not." Ander added gravely, "Whoever lived here . . . you're not going to find them, you know?"

"Yeah, we know, Ander," Cully said, placing a brotherly grip on the boy's shoulder.

"Well," Peep said, "we need to get Chen out of here, that's certain. But he won't be able to keep up with us. We need to make some means of transporting him."

"That's not a problem," Cully answered. "I'll build something at dawn tomorrow. We'll be able to get out pretty early. Why don't you see what Wally has to say about it?"

As Penelope approached Waljan, Bo Dog wagged his tail lazily. "Hey there, Bo. How's my pup, huh?"

Bo looked up at Penelope, his tail beating the ground. Peep scratched him behind the ears and snuggled her face into his bristly muzzle. Then she plopped down next to Wally.

"You knew," Penelope said. "You took out the stone and then you knew. How?"

After a long pause, Waljan answered. “A speaking stone is made from a rare opal that has unusual characteristics. No one really knows how it works. But the stones work together. When they’re cut to a precise shape, energy is amplified through them. The stones can be used to send and receive information on the energy waves that pass between them. Of all the speaking stones in existence, the Stone of Sages was the largest and most perfectly cut. It was so powerful that it could network all other stones together. I knew something was wrong when my stone went dark. That has never happened before.”

“That’s all? Your stone went dark? And then you knew the Sanctuary was in danger?”

“Well, there is a little more to it, but essentially, yes,” Waljan replied.

“You okay?” she asked. Waljan stared into the black distance. “Look, Wally, I know this must be really hard for you. And you’re right. I don’t really understand it, not being Abidanian myself. But you can’t take the blame for it. You are one knight against an unknown enemy.

“Master Chen seems like a very sweet old man and I imagine the rest of the Agasti were really special people. But we need to put mourning aside and make some decisions. Master Chen can’t stay here alone. He needs medical attention. And people need to know what happened. Cully is going to make some kind of transport so we can carry Chen to safety. Do you know where that might be?”

Wally nodded and took a breath. “Dead Springs. You asked me what I was doing out here. Well, I was sent here from Mortinburg with a request for the Agasti. There is a lot of conflict within the Abidanian community. As we grow in number, it seems harder to navigate the competition among our elders. Too many want to speak for the king rather than serve him. It leads to a lot of confusion about what’s true, what’s expected of us, and how to behave. Those who are most loyal agreed that we should bring our concerns to the Council of

Miqodesh—Master Chenaniah and the Agasti—to be sure we establish and follow the king’s wishes, not our own.

“After meeting with them, I was supposed to rendezvous with Moriel and Haden at Dead Springs. That would have been a week ago. They’re probably still there and very anxious for a report. I would have preferred to contact them by now. But those bounty hunters took my speaking stone, and now that I have it back, it’s useless.”

Wally rubbed his face slowly with both hands and exhaled. “How did you find me, anyway? What were you and Cully doing so far south?”

“Looking for you, of course. Everyone was expecting to see you at the Harvest Festival. When you didn’t show, Cully and I weren’t the only ones worried.”

“So, not only did I fail to protect the Sanctuary, I ruined the Harvest Festival, too? I couldn’t possibly have something better to do than show off my fletching skills to the adoring public?”

“Wally, you’re being overly sensitive.”

“I have reason to be. It seems like expectations are set too high. No matter what I do, people are disappointed in me.”

“I didn’t say we were disappointed. The people of Mortinburg appreciate you, and your community relies on you, that’s all.”

“Maybe I don’t want to be relied on. Maybe relying on me is a mistake. It wasn’t very long ago that I was happily unknown, free from the judgments of every last person in town.”

“You are seeing everything upside down.”

“I’m sorry, Peep. I’m going on days with very little sleep and the lack of it doesn’t help in coping with this horror.”

“I understand. Anyway, everyone was worried about you, so Chaz Myrtle sent us to Cloakwood. Then, we tracked you from there. Honestly, we wouldn’t have found you at all without Bo Dog. Isn’t that right, pups?”

Bo grunted and rolled on his back for a tummy rub. Wally obliged.

“Okay,” he said. “You and Cully have a good plan. We’ll head for Dead Springs in the morning. Right after I get a thorough report from Master Chenaniah.”

“And what about Ander?” Peep said.

“What about him?”

“Wally. You told Ander he could return to free his brothers and the bounty hunters.”

“Oh! I completely forgot about that. But does he want to?” Wally asked.

Peep raised her eyebrows. “Are you really asking that?”

“Well, I wouldn’t want to. In any case, we can’t send him back alone, and I need all of us to help with Master Chen. I doubt Chen weighs much, but with our packs and gear I can’t spare anyone. Ander has to come with us to Dead Springs, and from there we can send him to Cloakwood on horseback. His brother’s gang is a tough bunch. They’ll be okay.”

“Wally! It will take us a week, maybe longer just to get to Dead Springs under these circumstances!”

“It’s not like we have a lot of choice, Peep. It’s the survival of the last of the Abidanian Agasti—and a witness to an egregious crime—against the inconvenience and discomfort of a band of questionable characters. Not a hard decision for me.”

“Do you think it would be a hard decision for Ander?” Peep challenged.

“Do you have any idea what kind of treatment that kid endured, Peep? Trust me, he’s a lot better off with us. I can sleep with myself knowing that I am protecting him from those so-called brothers. Maybe he’ll have a better future with us than with them.”

“That’s not your decision to make.”

“And you think he’s old enough to make the decision himself? Look, I didn’t say I wasn’t going to let him return. I’m just saying that for now it’s best for everyone that he come with us to Dead Springs. This wouldn’t even be an issue if his brothers hadn’t ambushed me in the first place!”

“Fine—have it your way. Cully and I will trade watches tonight.”

“It’s not *my* way—it is just how things are,” Wally insisted as Penelope made her way back to Cully.

Cloakwood



“We should be out there searching, not sitting here like brooding hens!” Haden huffed, triggering a fit of coughing and sputtering. He sat in a corner table at the Dead Springs Tavern and Inn with his good friend Moriel and rancher Chaz Myrtle. The inn and town were appropriately named; the three men had been the only patrons all morning.

Chaz offered the old hunter a handkerchief. “Haden, are you sure you’re all right?”

“Of . . .” He stopped midstream to clear his throat. “Of course I am! A few white hairs and next thing you know, everyone is trying to feed me prune mush and help me into a rocking chair! I may be old, but I’m not dead.”

Sir Moriel, a leading figure in the Abidianian community, couldn’t help but smile at his gruff friend. His mild amusement hid a deep concern for Haden’s excitability. As a Knight of the Realm, Sir Moriel was used to a life of self-denial and hardship. But Haden was a layman. And even though he was experienced in the wilderness, he had aged noticeably over the past couple years.

Moriel wished his old friend would take up less active interests than traveling Mortania in support of the Abidianian Realm. “Even the youngest and strongest among us need to rest some

time, Haden. Chaz is right in his concern.”

“Not with Waljan out there, lost somewhere in Cloakwood! If you two children don’t want to come with me, fine. I can search the woods well enough alone.”

“Haden,” Chaz reminded him, “Cully, Penelope, and the dog are out there already. Wally is in good hands. You really shouldn’t get yourself all upset.”

“Shouldn’t I? Why did we send him alone?”

“You know why we sent him alone, Haden. It’s part of his journey. He is not a child any longer. He’s a Knight of the Realm who must complete his Tribulation.”

The Tribulation visited every young knight loyal to the King of Abidan. Waljan’s formation in the ways of the king had been rushed and he was knighted earlier than most. There had been discussion among the Twelve—the community’s council of elders—that Waljan was not truly ready for knighthood. Moriel disagreed.

“You knights and your self-punishment. Isn’t life hard enough without you searching for misery?” Haden complained.

Moriel laughed gently. “He is going to be fine, Haden. Trust me. Now, let’s order some breakfast before they throw us out.”

A gust of wind rushed upon the three men as the tavern door swung forcefully open. Haden turned, hoping to greet Waljan. Catching sight of a tall and lanky young man, he turned back around in disappointment and took a swig of coffee.

“Well, Tyre Pruitt! You’re a long way from home,” said Chaz.

Tyre, son of the beleaguered widow Josephine Pruitt, had grown into a ruddy and responsible young man and was one of Waljan’s close friends.

“We were just about to order some food, son. Are you hungry?” Moriel asked.

“No, sir, thank you. I ate hours ago. You gentlemen are getting a late start this morning.”

“We don’t have much appetite really,” said Haden.

“I have news that won’t help, unfortunately.”

“Why? What’s happened?” Haden asked.

“There’s been an attack on Smithtown with many casualties.”

“Anyone we know, Tyre?” Chaz asked.

“Can’t be sure, Mr. Myrtle. Reports are sketchy.”

“We’ll organize volunteers and supplies to help,” said Moriel. “Haden and I can’t seem to raise a glow on our stones. Can you take a message back to Mortinburg?”

“Yes, sir,” Tyre responded without hesitation. Then, reluctantly he added, “but there’s more. Word throughout the region is that this attack is the work of Maweth, the Shadow Assassin.”

Moriel froze, but Haden erupted in typical fashion, “What nonsense! Who came up with that cocka”—*cough*—“that cock-amamie”—*cough, cough*—“suggestion?” he gulped down his coffee and cleared his throat hard.

Bracing himself for the answer, Moriel asked Tyre, “What makes them think that, son?”

“It was done at night, sir. They woke to an inferno in multiple locations.”

“Well that just suggests the fires were set. Not only is Maweth long dead, but he was an assassin—a master swordsman—not an arsonist.”

“It’s the mysterious nature of it, I guess,” Tyre explained. “No one saw a thing or heard a sound. It was completely random with no explanation.”

“I see,” said Moriel. “Fairy tales have legs in the absence of a logical explanation. A proper investigation will dispel that rumor.”

Tyre didn’t budge. He just stood like a statue, staring at Moriel.

“What, Tyre? Is there something else?” Moriel asked.

“Yes, sir. They are blaming us for this tragedy. They claim Maweth is somehow connected to the Abidan community.”

It didn’t matter that in day-to-day life the Abidian community integrated seamlessly into society, whether in Mortinburg, Smithtown, Echo Canyon, or any other city. It

didn't matter that citizens from among their community were typically hardworking and law-abiding. Nor did it matter that Abidians often took the lead in improving the living conditions and safety of the cities in which they lived. As members of a community that professed loyalty to the king of another land, they were regarded suspiciously, despite their deeds. And although Abidians had enjoyed greater acceptance in Mortanian civilization since the Battle of Centennial Court, it was a tolerance they didn't want to test. To their detractors, Abidians were superstitious and entertained ridiculous claims. But worse, the Abidians set themselves apart. At least that is how it seemed from the outside.

"Well," Moriel concluded, "suspicions against us will certainly put a damper on our volunteer efforts."

"We could rally other communities within the city. Keep ourselves in the background," Chaz suggested.

"Mom has already begun organizing volunteers and food through her women's league. They always like being the center of these kinds of efforts," said Tyre.

"May the light of Castle Mount shine on Josephine Pruitt," said Moriel. "Get Josiah Constance involved, too. Maybe he can spare some supplies and wagons. Is the doctor available to help out?"

"They are all on top of it, sir. A caravan left just before I did."

"Thank you for letting us know about this," said Moriel.

"It's a long ride from Mortinburg. Will you join your mother in Smithtown?"

"I'm not sure I will see Mom, but I do plan to help out in Smithtown after stopping in Mortinburg briefly. And you?"

"We will be there as soon as we can," Moriel assured Tyre.

Haden jumped in, "Okay, okay! Now that we've come to the aid of everyone else in Mortania, what are we going to do about Wally?"

"What's wrong with Wally?" Tyre asked.

"He's a week overdue from the Sanctuary at Miqodesh, that's

all!” Haden spewed, glaring at Moriel.

“Miqo-wah?” said Tyre.

“Miqodesh—the dwelling of the ancient ones who guard the Stone of Sages. You’ve been in the community for a while now, Tyre. You’ve never heard of the Sanctuary?” Moriel scolded lightheartedly.

“I’m sorry, Sir Moriel, I’ve never been a particularly good student.”

“All you need to know, Tyre, is that the Sanctuary is deep in Cloakwood.”

Tyre furled his brow. “Cloakwood? Few who get lost in there ever find their way out.”

“Exactly!” said Haden, satisfied that at least someone could see the gravity of the situation.

Sunrays burst from the horizon and wove like a tapestry through the evergreens. Cully had already been at work for some time. He wrapped one last band of sinewy bark around the joints of a wooden stretcher and tested its strength. With a few blankets for comfort, it would do. Ander made himself useful by preparing a breakfast that could last the company hours on the trail, while Penelope and Waljan attended to Master Chen and tried to make sense of his story.

“But, sir, you said they left you alive to warn our people. Who? And what are they warning us about?” Wally asked.

“I don’t know. It was like a dream. All I have is impressions. Darkness. Fire. Screams of agony and deep silence. And death.”

Exasperated, Waljan took Peep aside. “I can’t make any sense of this. Why can’t he remember what happened less than 48 hours ago?”

Peep shrugged. “Maybe the whole thing was too much for him. All that’s left is a bit of memory confused with snippets of nightmare—even perhaps some hallucination. It’s not unexpected, considering. He’s overwhelmed with grief.”

“But, Peep, he’s an *Agasti*. *Agasti* don’t get overwhelmed.

They don't get scared. They have a steel will—they are the epitome of self-control and courage.”

“I am sure he is very wise and disciplined, but he is also a frail old man,” Peep said.

“Never mind. You don't understand.”

“Don't I? Maybe I am just too thick-headed.”

“Peep, that's not what I meant.”

“I know what you meant. I am not Abidanian—not quite up to your standards. It's not the first time you've hinted at it.” She stood. “I have things to do.”

Penelope stomped off to find Cully. He was pulling Ander around on the stretcher. “Wow, Cull! That works great!” She hoped her enthusiasm would chase away her irritation with Wally.

“We'll have to lift it where the terrain gets rough, but with the four of us, it shouldn't be too much trouble,” Cully said. “Where's Wally and Master Chen?”

“They're resting—Master Chen in his bed and Wally in his superiority.”

“Wow. You two are stepping all over each other these days.”

Culbert had watched Waljan and Penelope's friendship grow, flourish, and change throughout their entire lives. They were as close as any two individuals could be. But a tension had always existed between them. At times it was competitive, at other times intensely interdependent. It took the form of verbal sparring and one-upmanship. But it was hard for Penelope to dismiss her most recent conversations with Waljan as nothing more than this.

Flipping the cot upside down, Culbert playfully dumped Ander to the ground and set him to the task of filling canteens. “So, what happened this time?” he asked Penelope.

Penelope picked at the needles of a nearby pine, mindlessly tossing them to the ground. “Do you ever get the feeling that Wally looks down on you because you aren't Abidanian?”

“Of course not. Do you?”

“Yeah. I do.”

“Are you sure you’re not just blaming him for your own feelings of not measuring up? Or maybe harboring a bit of jealousy?”

“Why should I be jealous? I can still out-hunt, out-shoot, and out-run him on a bad day.”

“Yeah. But he’s still the Hero of Mortinburg.”

Penelope propped herself against the tree, arms crossed.

“Look,” Cully continued, “there is only one thing to consider here. Do you believe in the king, or don’t you? If you do, there is nothing preventing you from joining the community. If you don’t, that doesn’t make you less of a person. Do you think Wally would let you hang around him this long if it did?”

Penelope kicked at the ground.

Cully continued, “He has been on edge, I admit. He laid into me pretty hard yesterday. It’s like he really can’t accept what’s happened here. But that has nothing to do with us, Peep.”

Cully’s words of assurance offered a bit of comfort, but Penelope still felt that he didn’t quite understand. Still, she had to put her concerns aside and focus. In the wake of what would be called the Miqodesh Massacre, the group’s primary task was getting Chen to safety. After much pleading and explanation, they succeeded in getting the reluctant Master Chenaniah secured in the stretcher.

The companions heaved packs onto their backs and began to drag the old master out of the village. Chen moaned deeply, “The Sanctuary has been occupied and protected for generations. I have failed the community. We have never forfeited our guardianship.”

Waljan consoled him, “And you haven’t still. We have the Stone with us. Every last shard has been recovered. Please try to rest.”

Cully shouldered the right side of the stretcher while Waljan shouldered the left. Ander walked ahead, looking for the route that would provide the smoothest ride for Master Chen and the

least trouble for Cully and Waljan. Still, it was slow going. The feet of the stretcher kept snagging on roots, stones, and brambles. From time to time, Waljan or Cully would stumble, pitching poor Chen to one side or the other. Penelope compensated by holding the side of the cot steady, but she had little leverage to counter a misstep. They went on as best they could for some time. As they passed a large Bollia tree, surrounded by fallen pods, Ander got an idea.

“Stop a minute!” he said enthusiastically.

The men set Master Chen down, happy to stretch their arms and loosen their necks and shoulders. Ander retrieved one of the remarkably large Bollia seeds from inside its pod. It was at least eight inches in diameter. Twisting a knife deeply into each end, he bored a two-inch-wide hole through the center.

“Of course! A wheel! Ander, you’re brilliant,” Cully said.

“We just need a shaft strong enough to support the weight of the stretcher without snapping and some cooking lard for lubricant,” Ander said.

“I think we might have put your brothers in significant danger by bringing you with us, Ander,” Cully suggested in jest. “I can’t imagine how they’re faring without you.”

“Well, they won’t have to for long,” Ander said. “As soon as we get Master Chen to Dead Springs, I will be on my way.”

“Our loss, for sure,” said Cully.

Ander smiled, and everyone busied themselves with finding a suitable axle for the Bollia pod. Master Chen suggested which species of tree would likely yield the needed branch. Within a half hour, the branch was found, the wheel greased and mounted, and the spirits of all lifted. After some food and water, the band was back on the trail, making twice as much time with Ander’s ingenious solution.

As the days passed, Penelope noticed that Master Chen had begun to mutter to himself. Beads of water formed on his forehead, and his eyes glazed over. Despite their efforts, Master Chen was fading.

“Wally! Cully! Can we go any faster? The master is really struggling.”

Cully replied, “We are going as fast as we can, Penelope.”

Penelope tried to rouse the old man. “Master Chenaniah, can you tell us a traveling story?”

He glanced over at her vaguely and said something no one could understand.

“I have an idea,” Ander said, digging in his apron. “I found this poem. It fell out of one of the books back at the village. Maybe I can read it to him as we go?”

“Give it a shot,” Penelope said as she dabbed the old man’s forehead with a cool cloth.

Ander read:

In the now, I touch forever

What has been will ever be

Separated, still together

I in you, and you in me.

“I know this,” Wally interrupted. “This is the ‘Kinsmen’s Ballad.’ We sing it on days when we honor those who have gone before us.” He continued in song:

Reaching back we can touch our future

Moving on, we can find our past.

In the Realm, there is nothing surer

Than the home we will find at last.

Master Chen’s weakened garbling joined Waljan in the chorus. Soon, the entire company picked it up and they all sang together.

In the king we are one.

In the king we are one.

In the king we are family.

In the king we are one.

Each a link in the chain of freedom,

Infinite present, we reside

O’er the vastness of all being

Ever praising at his side!

In the king we are home.

In the king we are home.

In the king we have found ourselves.

In the king we are home.

The rhythm of the music found its way into the company's gait. Their voices mingled with the crunch of dried leaves and the thud of heavy feet against the damp forest floor. It lent a spark of life to Master Chen's waning breath. Before long, the travelers cleared the canopy and emerged from the eastern perimeter of Cloakwood.

"It's a clear shot from here, gang. Stay with us, Master Chen!" Wally shouted in triumph against the low groans of a rising windstorm. "Dead Springs is straight ahead. And it looks like we'll arrive just in time!"

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